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ABSTRACT

Even while struggling with their own biases and values, communication scholars can and should teach a unit on ethics in the basic communication course. One possible approach begins on the cognitive level by describing four different orientations toward ethics: hedonistic, legalistic, altruistic, and situational. By working out case study situations in small groups, students clarify their own ethical orientations. When students ask for an ethical absolute, the principle that communication must have an upbuilding, loving effect on the receiver is useful, but not as simple as it first might appear. Teachers must also confront the question of whether they should express their own values and biases in the classroom. Historically, colleges and universities have provided moral education; in fact, values are inherently taught in every classroom in every discipline. Thus, the issue is not whether but to what extent and in what manner values and biases will be expressed. Most teachers fit into one of the following teaching styles: (1) ignores ethics completely; (2) transmits certain vital values; (3) upholds the standards of the culture; (4) acts as a "gatekeeper," focusing on student values; (5) plays "devil's advocate" by constantly asking provoking questions; (6) tries to serve as a personal model for proper behavior; and (7) affirms personal values without forcing them on the students. (JL)

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Can We as Communication Scholars Teach Ethics without Preaching Values?

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The focus of this paper is two-fold. This paper is first an attempt to outline one way in which to approach the teaching of a unit on ethics in the basic interpersonal course. Secondly, it addresses the pervasiveness of value questions throughout all units in an interpersonal course.

Can we as communication scholars teach ethics without preaching values? My basic response is that we can and should teach a unit on ethics in our basic communication courses, while struggling with the continuing issue of our own biases and values.

Allow me to briefly outline one possible approach to teaching ethics in the basic communication course. This approach begins on the cognitive level by describing four different orientations toward ethics: 1) a hedonistic approach; 2) a legalistic approach; 3) an altruistic approach; and 4) a situational approach. After defining and illustrating each of these approaches, students are given case study situations and placed in groups to discuss the cases. Students can generate their own personal solution and then discuss their alternative approaches within their small groups. Each solution is analyzed, and where possible, classified as one of the four orientations described above. Through this process, students are aided in clarifying their own typical ethical orientation. Often, students realize that their ethical orientations switch in different settings.

The complexity of the communication process becomes readily apparent as students grapple with the ethics of lying, cheating, deciding whether to gratify their needs or someone else's, and choosing to treat individuals as persons or objects. As students come to realize that all communication influences others, whether for good or for evil, they begin to rethink the

impact their daily discourse has on the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of others. At this point, students often question whether there are any ethical absolutes to rely on. The one generalization I have found useful is presented in a text used in the basic course at Calvin College: "All communication must have an upbuilding loving effect on the receiver. Communication that produces injury of any type to the receivers is unethical" (Calvin College, 1973, p.3). (Loving in this context should not be interpreted to mean painless. A painful short-term effect may be the most loving action over the long term). While that appears to be a simple standard advocating the greatest good for the participants involved in the communication exchange, it is actually a very difficult standard to apply. The needs of both the source and the receiver must be taken into account. As active, intentional communicators, we are responsible to God for contemplated, attempted, and actual effects our communication has on others (Calvin College, 1973, p. 2). Similarly,

> we are responsible to God for the effects we allow other sources to have on us. As receivers we are held accountable for the positive and negative reactions that we give. Whether we let a communication influence us, or choose to ignore it, or reject it, after receiving it, we are accountable for the responses we give. (Calvin College, 1973, p. 3)

Having a loving, positive intent does not always result in a loving effect on the receiver. Thus, this general guideline is minimally useful in specific situations, since each receiver must interpret and re-interpret his/her intent, communique, and effect in each new exchange.

One particularly difficult situation to interpret is the daily interaction in the classroom. Can we or should we teach without advocating or preaching values? One answer to that question came in a book called Brother to a Dragonfly. The book tells the story of two brothers growing up together in the

deep South during the depression. At one point, Will Campbell compares the KKK to our system of American colleges and universities and says:

> universities teach, foster, and carry out more violence in one semester than the Klan has committed in its history, for it is they who produce the owners, the managers, the governors and the presidents, the rulers and the warriors. (Campbell, 1977, p. 245)

Whether or not you agree with Will Campbell, there is some truth to his contention. I have seen a number of affluent students walk into my classes with some pretty close-minded attitudes toward women, blacks, or handicapped individuals. Unfortunately, I have watched the same students walk out at the end of the semester to join their father's company with their biases intact. And I am left questioning myself: "Should I have confronted them more directly about their values and the effect of their values on others?" "Do I come on too strong and turn students off because I am a feminist?" "Should I be advocating particular values in my classroom?" "Should I remain neutral, a gatekeeper who facilitates the open exchange of ideas among students without advocating particular sets of values?"

The remainder of this paper is an attempt to raise those issues and to stimulate discussion about whether we should or should not express our own values and biases in the classroom.

Richard Morrill in his book Teaching Values in College claims that "the mission of American colleges and universities has been strongly shaped by a historical commitment to moral education" (1980, p. 1). He points out that Americans have always expected much from their institutions of higher education. Moreover, in an age of increasing moral disorder and uncertainty, society expects educational institutions to shoulder much of the responsibility (Morill, 1980, p. 7). "Colleges and universities, have, after all, always claimed a special capacity to influence conduct and thought, the formation of

character as well as the development of intellect.

As support for this goal, he cites a 1977 study implemented by Douglas Heath at Haverford College surveying the effects of the college on undergraduates. Respondents, consisting of alumni now in their thirties, asserted that the content of most of their courses had faded away, but the values have remained. Heath summarized his study of alumni by contending that "the college's distinctive, most salient, enduring effect was to permanently alter the character, the values, and the motives of many men" (1977, p. 9). While it may be sobering and unpleasant to recognize that the facts and theories we teach in many courses are soon forgotten it may cause us as academicians to reconsider course objectives and redesign courses accordingly (Morrill, 1980, p. 42).

Not only have colleges and universities historically been expected to provide moral education, it appears that values are inherently taught in every classroom in any discipline. In a book of readings published by NEA, the contention is made that "education is simply not value-free" (Purpel and Ryan, 1976, p. 74). One cannot teach interpersonal communication without affecting the way students think about moral issues and the way they behave.

An analogy is made to Arthur Miller's well-known play, Death of a Salesman.

> The worn-out Willy Loman describes the life of a traveling salesman to his two sons. They ask him, "Were you ever lonely, being on the road so much?" Willy answers poignantly, "Loneliness comes with the territory." Educators and the general public must realize that in our schools moral education is an unavoidable responsibility. It comes with the territory. (Purpel and Ryan, 1976, p. 74.)

Thus, the issue is not whether to express our own biases and values in the classroom, but rather "to what extent" and "in what manner" do we express our values and biases in the classroom.

As most of us teach, human beings are not passive reactors to stimuli, but rather active creators of meaning, engaging in intentional communication. Thus, teaching is an intentional activity. Teachers, therefore, are agents and moral agents among other things (Litke, 1976, p. 92).

Unfortunately, the role of teachers as moral agents is an oft-ignored role in many contemporary colleges and universities. As Morrill laments, the voice of moral education "is heard as a pious echo rather than as a call to action. It is preached boldly on the commencement platform, but not in the classroom," (1980, p. 2). In academic communities, "there is little confidence about what can be known in the moral realm, even less about why, how, and to whom it should be taught (Morrill, 1980, p. 3).

Given that teaching is an intentional activity and education cannot be value-free, how do we choose to approach values education in our communication classes? Briefly consider the following typical teaching styles to see if you fit into any of these categories. Perhaps you are a blend of several styles.

1) You may choose to ignore values questions in the classroom. Harmin and Simon dismiss this approach, arguing that it is impossible to ignore values. They permeate all subjects either implicity or explicity (1971, p. 4 - 16).

2) You could attempt to transmit certain values which you regard as vital. This type of instructor attempts to rationally convince students to accept what she/he has already decided is proper. This approach can create several problems. Students may rebel against attempted indoctrination. Or, they may publicly agree with the teacher, in order to ingratiate themselves

and win favor, while privately retaining their former beliefs. Richard Morrill attacks this approach arguing that colleges "would fail miserably if students were pressed and challenged only to agree with the precise content of the professor's own value system" (1980, p. 108). Maurice Broady concurs when he says the academic:

> should not use his [her] authority or his [her] podium to dogmatize, still less to proselytize. [She] he should not expect, and [she] he certainly cannot require [her] his students to accept [her] his ethical views. [Her] his job is to teach, not to preach. (1974, p. 58)

3) You could choose to be a "civic educator," upholding the standards of our culture (Kniker, 1977, p. 20). From this perspective, you are not operating out of your own values as much as trying to convey the typical values accepted in American democratic society.

4) You can attempt to be a natural gatekeeper who does not reveal his/her own preferences. Rather, you play the role of gatekeeper in a discussion, assuring that all students with opposing perspectives have the opportunity to express their opinions. Thus, the focus is not on your values, but on the class members and their beliefs.

5) Or you may operate in the tradition of Socrates, constantly raising questions about the nature of truth. You can play the role of devil's advocate, asking probing questions, without taking a stand. The questions can alert students to the costs of their positions and can teach them how to defend their beliefs.

6) Another style is the instructor who serves as a personal model for what is proper behavior. This personal model style is illustrated by statements on a course syllabus such as: "I will make every attempt to use non-sexist, non-racist language in this course. If I say anything

that you interpret as racist, sexist, or offensive to any religious or ethnic group, please talk with me about that remark."

7) The last option is the clarifier. This instructor will frequently share or affirm his or her personal values. However, the instructor is careful not to force choices on his/her students. The emphasis is on teaching students to evaluate and process their values, not to transmit specific values to students.

You probably know teachers who represent each of these styles. And you can probably recognize yourself in one style or in a blend of several styles. I can see myself as a clarifier on some days, a neutral gatekeeper on others, and sometimes even a advocate or preacher.

We find it easy to be prescriptive about our values and biases when it comes to effective communication principles. Pick any basic communication textbook and you will find prescriptions like: Be an attentive listener. Perceptions are not an absolute reflection of reality. Engage in perception checking. Use "I" messages to express your feelings. Be open to feedback. Don't confuse facts and inferences.

Yet when it comes to broader issues such as racism, ageism, and sexism, we are hesitant about confronting students and prescribing values for them. A friend's husband works with a small appliance rental business. Last month he went into a long tirade about "niggers." After we discussed his values for a while, he concluded:

> When I see a white person, I don't know if they are trustworthy or not. So I wait and see. But when I see a black walk into the store, I immediately become suspicious. I've been ripped off too many times in the past.

Many student values are based in life experiences which have never been

challenged by other perspectives or additional information. If my values are important enough to debate with my friends, shouldn't they also be addressed in my classroom? I can respond affirmatively, but I still struggle with how to do it. To what extent and in what manner can we appropriately express our values and biases in an interpersonal communication classroom?

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